

The Role of Empathy and Sympathy in Psychological Well Being



Psychology

KEYWORDS : Empathy, Sympathy, Psychological Well being, faith, health and love.

ARCHANA VERMA
SINGH

ABSTRACT

Happiness is indeed a state of mind. Our emotions, acquired and inherent, largely determine our happiness. It is up to us to cultivate positive emotions and repress the negative ones. This paper intends reading the essentials of happiness—the factors leading to psychological well being, the killjoys and the possible solutions. An endeavour would also be made to probe the cause of the reasons that hinder psychological well being and trace its relation to paucity of scintillating virtues like empathy, sympathy, care and its sister values.

One of the prerequisites of psychological wellbeing is undeniably based on happiness, complete harmony within and without. Does this harmony solely rest on our material possessions? The car in our garage, the expensive watch on our wrist? Is it determined by our environment or merely by good health? Our insatiable pursuit for joy and happiness depends on myriad things. Does sensual pleasure give true happiness? "You cannot expect to enjoy happiness when you are suffering from physical lassitude, intellectual indifference and moral idleness" (Sadler, 8). A congenial work environment contributes to the sense of joy and happiness, but when one is over stressed, caught up in the mad race to acquire material wealth, it can ruin a true sense of bliss, peace and harmony.

Happiness is indeed a state of mind. Our emotions, acquired and inherent, largely determine our happiness. It is up to us to cultivate positive emotions and repress the negative ones. Only then the ecstatic harmony within oneself and in our surroundings would descend on us. It is an undeniable fact that our state of mind depends on what goes on within and without. We do not live in a vacuum. We are connected to what goes around. Happiness and wellbeing can be savoured in totality only if peace prevails around.

Factors that hinder psychological wellbeing and cause psychological distress can be put in three different slots--- at the individual or subjective level, at the objective or societal level and the global level. The external forces too determine one's state of being happy especially if one is sensitive enough to sympathise and empathise. Happiness eluded some people, even if they are well off in every way. This is due to the fact that they relate to others unhappiness and feel the unease while the others are suffering. The sight of millions starving in Somalia may make some people feel guilty, who may stop going to fancy restaurants or throwing food. What about the affluent mother who experienced numerous sleepless nights feeling insecure for her daughters after the Nirbhaya rape case, and even going to the extent of thinking of shifting the girls abroad? Or the daughters who felt smothered by the very same mother who became too strict and wouldn't let them be away from her sight? Psychological wellness is a far off dream in such cases.

We can thus see that there are numerous factors on which our psychological well being depends. The paucity or rather bankruptcy of emotions like empathy, sympathy and care with its allied virtues in the present times hinders psychological well being. Empathy is the ability to mutually experience the thoughts, emotions, and direct experience of others. It goes beyond sympathy, which is a feeling of care and understanding for the suffering of others.

Does wealth give happiness? One cannot secure happiness by just being rich. Though "economic and psychological well-being are positively related. However, the relationship has been relatively weak" (Mullis, 119). Based on the surveys done in USA, Campbell (1976) characterizes it in the following manner:

... the proportion of "very happy people" is higher as we move from low-to-high income levels. A very stable relationship, but by no means an exclusive one. Even among the most affluent, there are a large minority who describe themselves as less than very happy, and a sizeable minority of the least affluent claiming that they are very happy. Happiness is far from the exclusive domain of the well-to-do.

While economic well-being does contribute to increase in psychological well being there remains a large percentage of the variance unexplained by the economic component.

The most essential aspect for the well being of a human is health--- mental and physical both. Good Health is the foundation of all happiness. In the presence of physical afflictions one fails to feel well psychologically, even if one has all the luxuries in life. For petty gains, food is adulterated, pesticides causing death and deformities are being blatantly used, but the authorities turn a blind eye. This shows a lack of concern--- sympathy empathy on part of our welfare state.

Another factor that adds to our joy and gives succour to our psychological well being is nature. Here the question whether psychological and ecological well-being is compatible comes to the fore. Ecological sustainability connotes a conflict between human well-being and ecological welfare:

Such discourse suggests that to keep from destroying the environment people must practice restraint, which may mean acting contrary to personal desires, needs, and ultimately, happiness. As long as environmentally responsible behavior is framed in self sacrificial terms, individuals will be faced with tough choices about how to act, because while the majority of the general public wants a safe and healthy environment (Gallup and Newport, 1990; Merck Family Fund, 1995), they also want happy lives. This apparent trade-off may make people less likely to behave in ways that promote ecological well-being. Given widespread indications that the health of the environment is in serious danger, in large part due to human consumption activity designed, ostensibly, to bolster personal well-being (Brown 2005:349-50)

If we disregard Nature the consequences can be alarming. When we are fed up with the hectic life of big hi tech cities, big buildings, congested places we always rush to mountains, sea beaches or the wild: "Paradoxically, man seeks happiness in deriving maximum benefit from scientific and technological advancement. This is what Eric Fromm calls the "having mode of existence, "which takes pleasure in possessing, grabbing and consuming natural resources. Havelock Ellis rightly says that "The sun, the moon and the stars would have disappeared long ago had that happened to be within the reach of predatory human hand". The need is to affirm a stronger and deeper human-relationship with the earth, the source of our life, based on empathy, sympathy and care.

The next important facet for psychological well being is Faith.

Faith in a supreme being is ennobling and inspiring. Faith exhorts us to do everything in our power to make this world a better place to live in. Religion affords opportunity for the exercise of many of our more tender and uplifting emotions and scintillating sublime virtues of awe, reverence, gratitude, pity, humility, altruism and forgiveness.

Many pose this question: "Does religiosity contribute to individuals' sense of psychological well-being? Both common sense and theoretical considerations would suggest "yes". Religiously active persons appear to have both cognitive and emotional "maps" which help them make sense out of the disordering experiences of death, suffering, and "moral bafflement," to use the language of functional analysis (Geertz, 1974). Yet, research exists to cast doubts upon these assumptions. Wilson and Miller (1968) found that high scorers on religious beliefs and practices were more "fearful" and "anxious" than non-religious persons.

The problem arises when religion is radicalised and in its name, through misinterpretation people indulge in violence. One has to 'relearn' what is best expressed in the Rigvedic hymn that enjoins, Ekam Sad Vipra Bahudha Vadanti meaning the real is one, the learned speak of it variously. Where this attitude is negated the conflict between forces of fundamentalism and those of peace and tolerance come into play. Who can forget the 9/11 attack on the world trade centre? Violence begets violence. Legitimized violence too kills innocents in the crossfire. In the age of terrorism, one needs to learn the true meaning of religion, re-shape our education system and find strength to build a better future by adhering to the allied virtues of empathy and sympathy. This would go a long way in ensuring the psychological well being not only at the individual level but of the community, both national and global as well.

One may contend that self control or resilience is an essential life skill for attaining psychological well-being but how many of us can turn away from social suffering and not be moved by it? An individual's sense of well-being is shaped by personal aspirations, life expectations and choice of means necessary to pursue the desired ends. It is a well established fact that in all societies, human beings evaluate their well-being based upon the degree to which circumstances allow them to engage in 'Validating activities.' Such social actions affirm a person's identity as a respected member of society, in consonance with one's sense of inner needs, whether they be simple, physical needs, or more complex, transcendental needs.

Empathy and sympathy are modes of human-relatedness. In these lie the roots of altruism and morality. They teach one sharing and sensitivity to the needs of others. In general it is seen that women exhibit advanced level of empathy and sympathy. Often this earns them the title of being "weak". Is feeling moved by the suffering of others a weakness or a moral strength? If some people overlook or underestimate these virtues and term them as weakness they are not to be blamed but pitied. Patriarchy masters their temperaments and such notions are the chief causes of women's suffering. The virtues of empathy are

ingredients required for more advanced form of living. Assimilation and development of the same in both the sexes is a must for promotion of overall well-being of humanity, promulgation of morality and creation of a world free of apathy and violence. The illogical assumption that women are weak and powerless due to their sensitivity to the needs and suffering to others – should be replaced with recognition and celebration of these strengths of women which make them morally strong so as not hurt or indulge in destruction. The ego boundaries and male superiority complex should be shed and taking examples from the lives of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Buddha who embraced these virtues, we should adopt and weave them in our lives to usher a peaceful, happy, considerate, kind and a sympathetic world. Mother Teresa found the same joy in helping the destitute. By leading a life founded on advanced psychological well being that can be reached by lending a helping hand in all respects.

Psychological well being can be achieved with the help of good governance, and inculcation of values which will go a long way in determining the happiness of people. It depends on inclusion of the others as well. Shouldn't we organise ourselves and cut down on the spending in unnecessary places and practice self control and start buying swadeshi at the macro level and teach our children that our money flows to the other countries if we buy brands and apprise them that we are under a huge debt we owe to the world bank?

One will be surprised to know that Bhutan is the only nation in the world where the prosperity of the nation is not measured in economic numbers but on gross happiness index. The ideal environment where happiness and harmony reside is summarised in the following line from RAMAYANA: Dahik devic bhotic tapa ram raj kabhu na vyapa, where people wish "sarve sukhina bhavantu".

Anthropologists, historians, literary theorists, social science experts, and scholars engaged in the study of what goes to pave the way for psychological well being join together to investigate the cultural representations, collective experiences, and professional and popular appropriations of human suffering in the world today. These authors contest traditional research and policy approaches. Recognizing that neither the cultural resources of tradition nor those of modernity's various programs seem adequate to cope with social suffering in our times, they base their distinctive vision on the understanding that moral, political, and medical issues cannot be kept separate and only by practising empathy sympathy and care can we mitigate and finally remove the impediments in the way of psychological well being. Care, nurturance, tolerance, selflessness and empathy promote zest in life and these positive qualities are to be adopted in order to expand our capacity to experience joy and happiness.

REFERENCE

- Bernstein, Mark. Well-Being American Philosophical Quarterly, University of Illinois Press Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jan., 1998), pp. 39-55. | Brown, Kirk Warren and Tim Kasser. Are Psychological and Ecological Well-Being Compatible? The Role of Values, Mindfulness, and Lifestyle, Social Indicators Research, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Springer Nov., 2005), pp. 349-368. | Campbell, A. Subjective measures of well-being, American Psychologist 31, 1976, pp117-24. | George, Arthur St. and Patrick H. McNamara. Religion, Race and Psychological Well-Being Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Vol. 23, No. 4 Wiley: Dec., 1984), pp. 351-363 | Mullis, Randolph J. Measures of Economic Well-Being as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being. Social Indicators Research, Vol. 26, No. 2 Springer, Mar 1992, pp. 119-135 | Sadler, William S and Lena K Sadler. The Quest for Happiness, New York: Wilcox and Follet, 1943. |